

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH"Until recently, I was dismissing politicians, and now I serve them coffee"

Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH, recently presented a report in which he stated what he has achieved during the last two years, the period in which he has been performing the duty of the first man of the International Community in the neighboring country. However, he also announced his plans for the next year, after which he will leave his current position. About all these things Wolfgang Petritsch who is for some people the 'absolute ruler' of BiH and for the others a 'useful advisor', says:

BiH is not in coma anymore

WP: The report is based on the realization of three strategic goals; a mass-scale return of refugees is the first goal. Then, a long-term goal for the next year is economic recovery and economic reform. We have achieved a lot in BiH, now there is almost a unified market, borders between the entities are porous in terms of trade and thus the economy can flourish. We shall continue with attracting of foreign companies and we hope that Croatian Companies will be among them. Some day the cooperation of BiH with its neighbors will be a secret of its success. The third goal is the strengthening of BiH

institutions. My goal is the strengthening of the central institutions, which will be working for the benefit of the state.

SD: How do you see the judgment of some of Your colleagues from the IC who claim that BiH is a patient in coma and that the testing of new therapies cannot bring him back to life?

WP: First of all, BiH is not in coma. It was in coma during the war, however, since 1996 it has been waking up from that coma, especially during the last two years. Our 'patient' is recovering fast now. Problems always exist in all three peoples, the Croat, Serb and Bosniak, and they are consequences of the war. I have to insist that the Rule of Law is respected, that the institutions are respected. The establishment of the so-called Croat self-rule was against Dayton and I had to react very fast and resolutely in order to prevent the inflicting of a bigger damage to the Dayton Peace Accord and (help the) people who would have been affected by it. A small group of extremists within the Croat community tried to make it, however, luckily they failed in their attempt to damage BiH as a state. It is clear to me – and now an increasing number of the Croats start to accept it – that it is very important for them, as the people the smallest in number in BiH, to remain within the institutions and use the mechanisms of these institutions for their benefit.

SD: Those who are well informed about the situation in BiH claim that the Croats have now become 'black sheep in BIH' and that they are being scrutinized in the most rigorous way. Do you agree with this judgment?

WP: Where the Rule of Law is not respected, the people who are responsible for that are being scrutinized as 'black sheep' and this affects the whole community. For this reason I believe that it is important to remind the Croats that the Law places obligations on the citizens of a country. The Croatians

who live in Croatia or the Croat(ian)s who live in Austria also have to respect the laws of the country that they live in and because of it I do not see any reason why the Croats who live in Herzegovina would not do that? I think that everybody understands everything now – play according to the rules, respect laws and you will get the rights that you deserve.

A letter for Carla del Ponte

SD: Ante Jelavic appeared before the Sarajevo Cantonal Court this week, and his lawyer expects that charges pressed against him will be dropped because they are too extensive and illogical. Can Jelavic's case homogenize the Croats in BiH?

WP: I do not think that there are grounds for such judgments. I believe that it was very wise of Mr. Jelavic to appear before the Court. I am saying this in terms of accepting legally elected institutions. I do not want to comment on his case further as long as the legal proceedings are ongoing. I can only say that I am insisting on the independence of the judiciary because everyone has to have the right to a fair trial especially when this concerns a person such as Ante Jelavic, who perhaps believes that this is about politicization. We shall take care that the highest legal standards are respected, and I believe that the legal proceedings will be fair and correct.

SD: Carla Del Ponte is coming to BiH next week, and the media are speculating about new indictments, that regularly cause a real panic among politicians. What are you going to talk to her about? Is the cooperation between The Hague and BiH satisfactory?

WP: I have just finished a letter for Ms. Carla Del Ponte regarding the preparation of the meeting in Sarajevo. We shall

talk about cooperation. There are some problems with the RS. I believe that these problems will be solved because the opinion that the cooperation with The Hague represents a way ahead prevails. Of course, I cannot talk about speculations and concrete details or about the questions that she will pose. However, I want to contribute to improving the cooperation between BiH and The Hague, and especially of the RS.

SD: Do these more intensive contacts imply a final extradition of Karadzic and Mladic?

WP: Absolutely. It is the goal, and during the last weeks many defendants turned themselves in to the Court, a large number of them on a voluntary basis. This is a positive development because we have new dynamics with regard to the issue of war crimes and people understand that finally it is necessary to individualize guilt. The Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats were not committing the crimes collectively, but it is about an individual responsibility and guilt. The biggest number of people are completely innocent in all this and they should be released from this collective guilt.

SD: Another question is whether the atmosphere is mature enough for this?

WP: During the last two years in BiH I had an opportunity to see for myself this process of maturing.

SD: The Coalition Governments in the region, from Croatia to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and BiH, have problems regarding the arrangement of their own relations. Is the Alliance truly stable?

WP: This judgment is correct, but it is in the nature of each Coalition that it cannot be as stable as nationalistic blocks can. It was like this with the HDZ in Croatia or three nationalistic parties in BiH. Now we have a few democratic

parties that are working together and there are differences among them but they are united on the common ground that they want democracy. For this reason, when viewed comparatively, the Alliance is rather stable as the ruling Coalition. Europeanization is taking place in BiH and Croatia, that is problems are being viewed and solved in a European way. Democracy flows, and the art of politics is to control these changes and lead them to a right direction.

Croats are hostages of the HDZ

SD: Does the Alliance have an alternative?

WP: The Alliance is the best Government that BiH can have and offer at the moment. I am convinced that political changes will positively affect the opposition parties. The nationalistic parties will never be the same, they will change, the same way they are changing in Croatia now, or they will completely lose their position.

SD: Why, in your opinion, do the Croats in Herzegovina feel abandoned by the International Community and Croatia?

WP: The Croats in Herzegovina are, in many ways, hostages of the HDZ, that is of the HDZ hard-liners. Just take a look at their last election slogan in which they sent a message to their voters that if they did not vote for them, extermination would take place. It is a threat, one negative slogan. People remember the war and they are afraid. Thus, instead of encouraging, the HDZ has been discouraging people there and they feel abandoned because the HDZ is not in the Government here in Sarajevo. However, there are a great number of truly excellent Croat representatives in the Alliance who represent Croat interests.

SD: Who is among these representatives?

WP: For instance, Jozo Krizanovic, the Croat member of the Presidency. Then, Karlo Filipovic, the President of the Federation, and a whole line of Ministers who are members of the Federation Government, and some of them are from Herzegovina, such as, for instance, one of the Lijanovici brothers. They participate in the authorities and in this way they protect Croat interests. For this reason the Croats should not be afraid of changes, but they should be more interested in what the Government in Sarajevo can do for them. This is the first Government which really takes care of its citizens, and not only of one national group.

SD: Their political opponents call the Croat representatives in the Alliance 'obedient Croats' or marionettes?

WP: This is of course bad and unfair political propaganda and it damages the Croat people. The parties and authorities can be criticized but you cannot call someone 'a bad Croat' or marionettes just because they are members of some other party. It is not democratic. Democrats have to accept that both the authorities and the opposition have their roles.

SD: Is a revision of the DPA possible now?

WP: Yes, definitely. The situation is improving as a result of the Constitutional Court decision on Constituent Peoples and it will be implemented this autumn, in a few weeks. By my decision, the Croats and Bosniaks in the RS are already Constituent Peoples, and the same refers to the Serbs in the Federation, and the final possibility to improve this is the process that I call Europeanization. Thus, we have to move from Dayton to Europe – this is the slogan for BiH. This is a perspective. Croatia will be much faster on this road but it will strongly affect BiH and BiH Croats will be a bridge toward Croatia and thus they will help BiH to take the same road. Without Southeastern Europe, Europe is not complete.

SD: Where are the discussions on the third entity in all this?

WP: Each realistic Croat in BiH is against the third entity.

SD: And how many of these 'realistic' Croats are there?

WP: Their number is increasing, especially, the number of Croats who live outside Herzegovina. They realize that they would never be a part of that third entity, but they would be a minority in Posavina, Central Bosnia and here in Sarajevo. The advantage of the Croats is that they live on the whole territory of BiH and they should use this advantage. They have influence wherever they are, and the third entity would deprive them of it, it would reduce this territory. At least one third of the Croats would be left out of this third entity, and thus new borders would be created, new minority groups, and this is not the way ahead. The way ahead is integration...

Efficient central Authority

SD: And Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single state?

WP: BiH will always be a highly decentralized state, but it must have a very efficient central authority in Sarajevo to be a partner in relations with Europe. Central authority must be efficient, with representatives of all three peoples in it.

SD: How can the central authority be efficient and strong with such a great presence of the International Community? Should the High Representative's role be changed too?

WP: My role is changing all the time. Until the elections in November last year it was necessary that I have such a strong role. It was because the previous authority did not support

the creation of the state, the authority was too nationalistic and was only interested in the welfare of its respective peoples. I rejected many laws, I dismissed many politicians. Now with the Alliance, things are changing drastically. For example, let's take the Election Law. That was being discussed for four years, and now it has been adopted as a compromise of all three peoples, even the Croats are happy with it. It is an ideal model for the future; Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks negotiating over a quality compromise. Then I can step down. Two days before the Election Law was adopted, I had invited all the leaders of the Alliance to my home and they had discussed about the law for two hours, and I had not said a word. They talked, and I served them coffee.

SD: Why didn't you, being the international representative, impose the Election Law, when it is of such great importance? Why did you wait?

WP: It was exactly for the reason of reaching this compromise. Politicians in this country must learn that a compromise is something good and positive.

SD: The Croat(ian) media has reported a lot that the International Community is dissatisfied with the rate of reforms in BiH and your work, and criticism of you was also addressed by the British Helsinki Committee?

WP: As in any country, there are groups that have some interests or philosophy. The group that appeared just now, the so-called British Helsinki Committee is not a part of the Helsinki Federation, but a group that has eccentric ideas "such as to support Saddam Hussein." They are not a serious partner of ours.

SD: Still we await the audit on the "Hercegovacka Banka". Can you disclose some details?

WP: The report is being prepared. More than 1.1 million documents have been taken, more than 40 people, the best computer experts, have been working on it day and night. Now we are approaching the time when we can go public with a preliminary report. I will not go into details, but I will say that the decision to appoint an international administrator was a very good one. Millions in tax payers' money from Croatia and from elsewhere were misused in the Bank, there were many illegal deeds and we had to do what we did to free Bosnia and Herzegovina of such illegal activities. I will do everything so that the small depositors get their money back, and it is very important to me. I will insist that they have a priority in compensation.

Tanks were necessary

SD: In line with the investigation, will anyone be responsible for what was going on in the "Hercegovacka Banka"?

WP: Definitely. I cannot talk about the details as yet, but there will be serious consequences. Strange things happened in the "Hercegovacka Banka" and it had to be stopped.

SD: But why the tanks?

WP: Because when we got there for the first time in a calm manner, my men were threatened. They were injured, some of them were taken as hostages in Grude, and had it not been for the priests, they would have been shot at. It is not something easy, it was a hard decision, but I had to protect the lives of those who were on the ground.

SD: Why didn't you react according to the same model when severe incidents took place in Trebinje and Banja Luka?

WP: In Banja Luka, the first ceremony of laying the foundation stone for Ferhadija was stopped and the second one was held a few weeks later. The ceremony was also guarded by tanks that stayed in the background, but the Republika Srpska Police did their job. That was not the case in Mostar.

SD: Why didn't you dismiss any of the RS officials after the first incident?

WP: Because I wanted to make the President and the Government of the Republika Srpska repeat the ceremony in Banja Luka and do it successfully. President Mirko Sarovic helped during the laying of the foundation stone, and that is an historic act.

SD: Had the second attempt failed...?

WP: Mr Sarovic knew that he would have been dismissed.

I encourage religious leaders

SD: How do you see the role of the Church in BiH?

WP: Religious communities in BiH are very important because a part of the conflict is religiously motivated. It is enough to look at destroyed religious facilities. Because of that, it is an important step to separate the Church from politics. I keep encouraging the religious leaders that they have to turn to the spiritual dimension and ethics. It gives strength to the people. Also they have to promote tolerance and that is their great role.

SD: But tolerance is not something you mostly hear from religious circles in BiH?

WP: Religious communities and their leaders have to keep on

developing, travel to other parts of the world, have contacts with representatives of other religions because it gives a wider perspective of what is important in BiH.

SD: Chiefs of European diplomatic services have allegedly agreed that the whole region of Southeast Europe should be joined in some sort of economic union, or for a start, in a customs union?

WP: Anything that would help a quicker economic recovery should be looked into with great attention, and not through a prism of ideology. If closer trade liaisons can create more jobs, then why not? One has to be very pragmatic, in other words, see how the country would gain profit from relations with neighbors. A situation where everyone is gaining must be created. There will never be another Tito's Yugoslavia here, it is dead forever, but some sort of regional cooperation on entirely new grounds will always remain. Old models do not work in the 21st century.

SD: Transparency International made a report on corruption in BiH. What is in the report?

WP: Transparency International has so far made two reports; one about the forestry and logging industry and the other about the transparency of the International Community in BiH. The report on the alleged non-transparency of the International Community is very dubious and does not have the quality expected of Transparency International. It is the beginning of their work in BiH, these are young and ambitious people and they need more time to adopt the international standards of this NGO.

SD: What are your main objections to the report?

WP: First of all, the report was pompously announced, in the sense that the IC would not like it. This is not the way we should work. The International Community is a partner, not an

advertisement. That is the main objection, but I do not want to be too critical because these are ambitious people and in that sense they should be supported.

My bosses are watching me closely

SD: Your name has been associated with the concession for the third GSM network in BiH in relation to the Austrian bid. Why?

WP: There are many ongoing discussions because the people think I am almighty and can do anything. Since Telekom Austria expressed their interest in the third GSM network in BiH, it was claimed, by this 'simplified' way of thinking, that I was standing behind it, so it turns out everything that comes from Austria, comes owing to my efforts. That is simplification. I am not a representative of Austria here, but a representative of the International Community and my 'bosses' are watching very closely what I am doing. If we were not completely transparent in our work, I would not be holding this post. I cannot risk and can only come up with completely objective assessments. At any rate, Telekom Austria is owned by Telekom Italia. Your network in Croatia, VIP, is owned by Telekom Austria, therefore, indirectly by Telekom Italia, too. This is about the modern economy that knows no boundaries. It is also interesting that the manager of the Austrian company is a citizen of BiH, a Croat from Sarajevo, so it is about modern business, and not preferential treatment of anyone.

Croats have suffered a lot

WP: Unfortunately, not many Croats have returned to BiH. I wish to encourage Croats to return to BiH because this is their home, their country and BiH cannot exist without the Croat community here. The Croat community has suffered a lot and I

indeed hope the people will start returning on a more massive scale. Croats now have an equal status in Republika Srpska and will be included in the Republika Srpska Constitution as a Constituent People. The entity is no longer an entity for Serbs alone, but for all the three Constituent Peoples in BiH.